

Striking Parallel in C.I.A.'s Role in Viet Nam and Cuba

By RICHARD STARNES
Staff Writer

The Central Intelligence Agency's role in Vietnam has been assailed as bureaucratic ineptitude seasoned with arrogance of a high order, and it has been just as warmly defended as selfless patriotism of the utmost pugnance.

An insight as to which version is true may be gained by reference to the fully documented and unchallenged story of the part played by the CIA in Cuba last before Fidel Castro rose to power.

The parallels to today's gathering disaster in Saigon are remarkable, and so is the cloudy, controversial part played by the CIA.

Six years ago the same sort of drama was being played out in Havana.

Fulgencio Batista, a dictator much hated by the Cuban people, was being harried and inexorably destroyed by a tiny guerrilla force of almost comic-opera weakness.

Batista's large, well-equipped army was intact. His secret police were savagely efficient. But knowledgeable Americans on the scene felt a growing disquiet. Batista had everything going for him except the support of the people.

QUERY BY SMITH

These circumstances, of course, are dramatically duplicated in Vietnam today. And the sharpest parallel may be found in the curious role of the CIA then as now.

The U. S. Ambassador to Cuba during the twilight of Batista's brutal rule was Earl F. T. Smith, a financier and a former Army officer.

Here is what he has had to say about his relations with the CIA during the period that bears such remarkable resemblance to the present dismal involvement in Saigon:

"In September, 1957, I asked the chief of the CIA section attached to the Embassy to review their figures on Communist Party strength in Cuba, both as to card-bearing communists and communist sympathizers.

"I questioned our estimates because nine years earlier, when the communists for the last time in Cuba voted as a party under the communist label they polled over a 120,000 votes. Nevertheless, the Embassy CIA estimates on Communist Party strength in Cuba in 1957 indicated only 10,000 card-bearing communists and approximately 20,000 communist sympathizers.

"It is interesting to note that the CIA officer had a closed mind and demonstrated a resentment to my references to Fidel . . . as the 'outlaw' and the 'bandit leader in the hills'.

These figures, of course,

were shown by a remark he made when he walked out of my office. After I had asked him to review the figures, I heard him say, 'We don't care what you think.'"

TRANSFER

The CIA official was subsequently transferred (another pointed parallel to Saigon, where the chief of the CIA mission has lately been removed) but there is room to doubt whether the transfer of one individual could check the CIA's willful ways.

For example, there is Ambassador Smith's sworn testimony that the second-in-command of the CIA in Havana gave aid and comfort to Castro's forces at a time when the Batista government was fighting for its life.

"In September, 1957," Mr. Smith testified before the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, "the (Cuban) navy had an uprising at Cienfuegos. We in the American Embassy were familiar that a revolt of some sort would take place. That information came to us thru the

CIA or some other source in the Embassy."

The revolt failed. And at the trial of the officers who had attempted it, "It was brought out (again quoting Ambassador Smith) that the No. 2 (CIA) man had said that if the revolution were successful the United States would recognize the revolutionaries."

As soon as the Ambassador learned of this attempt by the CIA to fabricate foreign policy, he "laid down the law that neither the Ambassador nor anyone else could give any statement as to whom the United States would recognize; that there were only two people in the United States who had that authority: One was the Secretary of State and the other was the President."

Even here the story of the CIA's headlong pursuit of its own policies and its in subordination to the Ambassador does not end.

"Several months after I assumed my post as Chief of Mission in Havana," Ambassador Smith reported, "I sent a telegram to Allen Dulles, then director of the

CIA, marked: 'Allen Dulles' Eyes Only.'"

The telegram recommended the placing of an agent in the top echelon of the Fidel Castro forces, then hiding in the Sierra Maestra hills, so that the CIA could keep themselves informed as to the extent of communist infiltration and as to the extent of communist control of the Castro movement. . . . I must assume that this was never done, or they would have been better informed."

Just how poorly informed the CIA remained as to the true nature of Castroism may be gleaned from testimony before the Internal Security subcommittee, given nearly a year after Castro came to power, by Gen. C. P. Cabell, then deputy director of the CIA.

"We believe," Gen. Cabell testified, "that Castro is not a member of the Communist Party, and does not consider himself to be a communist."

In the light of this documented history of the CIA's role in Havana, the agency's machinations in Saigon can be seen in a somewhat truer perspective.